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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between Writing Centers and Writing-across-the-Curriculum (WAC) programs--central to the study was a survey designed to determine how writing programs are generally organized in higher education and how effective the people administering them judge them to be. The survey gathered information from 26 writing program administrators and Writing Center directors regarding: the history and development of their programs; relationships between the WAC program and the Writing Center on each campus; interactions among the Writing Center, Writing across the Curriculum, and the departments (faculty); what WAC programs and Writing Centers offer to the departments; and judgments about the effectiveness of the structures, offerings, and processes of their systems. Findings revealed a wide variety of relationships, ranging from programs with little or no collaboration to those featuring fully integrated activities. Specific recommendations include the following: (1) strengthening communication; (2) expanding collaborative efforts; (3) including faculty in the administration of programs; (4) making department heads aware of what writing can do for their students and how it cam be incorporated into their curriculum; (5) working to make the impetus for participating in WAC and using the Writing Center come from the inside of departments, not as an imposition from outside (and worst of all, as an imposition from the English Department); and (6) reconsidering what the WAC program and Writing Centers offer to the departments. (SR)

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WORKING TOGETHER: WAC, THE DEPARTMENTS, AND THE WRITING CENTER

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WORKING TOGETHER

WAC, THE DEPARTMENTS, AND THE WRITING CENTER

At colleges and universities it is not unusual to discover several different arms of the institution trying to achieve the same ends. Funding agencies, such as state legislatures, call this situation "redundancy," and frown at its inefficiency and waste. Academics are more likely to call it "learning reinforcement" and approve of it. In reality, academics are all too often not likely to comment on it at all, since they frequently don't even know it's going on. Lack of communication among departments and colleges is as widespread and potentially as wasteful as the dreaded "redundancy of programs" state committees are appointed to sniff out, making it difficult to strengthen each other's efforts as well as make them as efficiently administered as possible.

One such area of what I would prefer to call "mutual interest" on many campuses is the development of literacy skills. There is the usual freshman English requirement, often taught by part-time, adjunct, temporary, and graduate assistant instructors. There are advanced composition courses taught by more senior professors. These may be part of the offerings of an English Department, but they are sometimes housed in separate domiciles, departments of their own where they do not have to talk to all those people interested in teaching literature. There is, also, the ESL faculty, charged with working with non-native speakers, and courses devoted to writing in various disciplines, taught by faculty in business, music, history, or biology. And, finally, there is, on most campuses, a Writing Center set up to work with students majoring in all disciplines and a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program designed to support writing in all those various fields of study. Where does it all come together? Or does it? Are students effectively served by all the different efforts to push them to develop as mature thinkers and writers? Are

there more effective structures that should be in place?

To begin to answer such questions, I set out to examine the relationship between Writing Centers and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs. Central to my study is a survey designed to determine how writing programs are generally organized in higher education and how effective the people administering them judge them to be. The information I received from the 26 writing program administrators and Writing Center directors who took the time to respond to the questionnaire, which was mailed to 55 people, can be organized under five major headings. First, I found out something about the history and development of the programs being reported on. I also learned something about the relationship between the WAC program and the Writing Center on each campus. Category III asked questions about the interaction of the Writing Center, Writing Across the Curriculum, and the departments (which meant the faculty). Four established what the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program and the Writing Center offered to the departments. Finally, the respondents rendered some judgments about the effectiveness of the structures, offerings, and processes of the system they work in.

So what did I find out?

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF WAC PROGRAMS

I discovered that most of the writing-across-the-curriculum programs about which I was receiving information were between five and 15 years old, more of them between five and ten years old. To my surprise, over half of them did not grow out of Writing Centers or established activities of centers. They seem to have sprung from other needs and purposes and personnel.

RELATIONSHIPS OF WAC AND WC

Once the two programs found themselves co-existing, they do not seem to have had much

desire to merge their efforts, though they appear to work harmoniously. For example, in only 20% of those institutions surveyed was the writing-across-the-curriculum director and the Writing Center director the same person. Although almost half of the directors reported meeting with their counterparts frequently, and another quarter occasionally (with another quarter saying seldom or never), such meetings seemed usually to be the product of spontaneous, unplanned efforts. That is not to say that regularly scheduled meetings do not take place, only that the working relationship has a somewhat informal air about it. Although for the most part the directors did not report having any publicity materials that feature collaborative or complementary activities of WAC and the Writing Center, they did specify a number of projects on which they work together. Moving from those most frequently named to those less often mentioned, the list reported the following activities as areas of collaboration:

- defining the goals of writing-across-the-curriculum and the Writing Center
- providing scheduled workshops for faculty
- devising evaluation standards
- choosing instructional materials
- setting goals for student writing and learning
- devising evaluation methods, and
- designing student writing assignments.

It is important to note, however, that only 45% of the respondents answered this question, which suggests lack of collaboration in any of these areas for over half of the Writing Center and writing program administrators.

DEPARTMENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The response to questions about the cooperative efforts of the writing-across-the-curriculum program, the Writing Center, and departments was equally small, with less than half of the respondents choosing to answer them. Those who did, however, listed a wider variety of projects on which they work together. Their efforts include (again from the most often mentioned to the least) the following:

- making student writing assignments and devising evaluation standards
- explaining new teaching strategies
- setting goals for student writing and learning
- devising evaluation methods
- designing and administering Writing Enriched and Writing Intensive courses
- defining the goals of writing-across-the-curriculum and the Writing Center
- providing workshops for faculty
- dealing with student writing errors
- choosing instructional materials
- planning freshman seminars.

Some universities have moved beyond the usual types of collaborative activities to design projects of their own. They cited publication of a faculty newsletter or a Writing Intensive newsletter, "brown bag" workshops for faculty, and the initiation of peer tutoring in some departments. They have sponsored student writing contests and gone on wilderness retreats together. And there are new ventures in running online writing labs, assessment of university writing portfolios, and holistic assessment of freshmen and transfer students' writing.

It is particularly interesting to note, in light of that rich list of joint activities, that when

asked how often the WAC director meets with faculty and department heads, the percentage reporting frequent meetings was high, and when the answer was broadened to frequently and occasionally, almost all those reporting answered affirmatively. However, when asked how often the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum director and Writing Center directors met with department heads, the figure dropped considerably. Apparently, WAC directors consider such interaction to be a major part of their duties, whereas Writing Center directors see it as a smaller aspect of what they do. The work of WAC directors with faculty and department heads undoubtedly accounts for the fact that one-third of those responding estimated that between 25 and 50% of their faculty know about writing-across-the-curriculum and implement its principles in their classrooms. Another third estimated that between 50 and 75% of their faculty participate.

OFFERINGS TO DEPARTMENTS

Opportunities to be part of such programs take a wide variety of forms at different institutions. About three-quarters of those answering said that their Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program emphasizes both writing in the disciplines and writing to learn, and almost as many described their Writing Centers as dealing with both. Where workshops are given, they generally explore such topics as designing writing assignments, using writing-to-learn strategies, managing peer response groups, responding to writing in progress, conducting conferences, and moving to computer-aided instruction. One respondent cited a broader commitment to Communication Across the Curriculum, including reading, writing, listening, speaking, interpersonal, and technological skills.

The major difference between the offerings of the writing-across-the-curriculum programs and those of writing centers is apparent in their faculty workshops. Whereas 88% of the writing-

across-the-curriculum programs provide scheduled workshops, only 26% of the Writing Centers do. As one person noted, writing centers concentrate on student development, and cross-curricular programs on faculty.

EVALUATION

When asked about the effectiveness of their programs, most of those answering made highly positive remarks. Ninety percent of them, for example, reported their Writing Center to be heavily or moderately used and their Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program to be highly or moderately successful. They described the latter to be principally characterized by its support and encouragement of effective teaching, interdisciplinary networking, and faculty power. The relationship between the two programs was overwhelmingly described as productive and amicable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Is there a consistent picture here? Not entirely, of course. The survey revealed a wide variety of relationships, ranging from programs that have little or no collaboration to those featuring fully integrated activities. Some WAC programs operate in institutions that have no Writing Center; at others, the Writing Center is the program. If there is a norm, it involves shared goals, complementary and collaborative methods, but different audiences. Both writing-across-the-curriculum programs and writing centers seek to improve the learning, thinking and communication skills of students. To that end they work with each other to help faculty to improve teaching methods by incorporating writing to learn strategies and writing in the disciplines. The chief differences between the two lie in the fact that writing-across-the-curriculum programs work primarily through teachers, and writing centers primarily address

student needs. They are two roads headed toward the same destination.

The findings of my survey indicate that the most successful programs are those in which the roads converge, in short, those that feature extensive collaboration among WAC directors, Writing Center directors, and department heads and faculty. Discussion among involved, cross-curricular colleagues about student writing objectives, assignments, and evaluation allows the them to tailor their offerings to meet common goals. Such interaction may take the form of informal meetings, workshops, or regularly scheduled planning and evaluation sessions. In all three, the positive impact on teaching and learning is a result of partnerships that feature jointly defined goals, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods. Working together, WAC directors, WC directors, and department heads can devise effective support structures that enhance student learning and development. Specific recommendations include the following:

1. Strengthen communication among the three parts of the university: WAC, writing centers, and departments. Shared experience can take place in a wide variety of ways--regularly scheduled meetings, informal talk, list-serv discussions, exchange of yearly goals, year-end evaluations, etc. They will vary with the people and situations involved. The important point is that all parties, the WAC program, the WC, faculty and students, will benefit when the various entities charged with improving student writing let each other know what they are doing and how they are doing it. Easier said than done, of course. Even the smallest change or merging of turf can cause major upheavals in academia, but the fact is that collegial exchange of information and planning is beneficial to the whole. What Judy Gill points out about her own situation is not atypical. She says:

I'm not suggesting that the relationship between WAC and Writing Centers or between

> faculty and writing program folks is a completely harmonious one, but I do believe that fundamentally our goals are in accord, not in opposition. And while not everyone at our school is involved in the ongoing conversation about writing . . . and while we have our share of sometimes heated debate, we are talking to each other. And that's a good thing. (p. 176).

2. Expand collaborative efforts. Communication, at its best, leads to collaboration, shared responsibility for achieving common goals. Though collaboration too can fall victim to departmental and professional defensiveness, it functions best in an atmosphere of mutual respect and under the assumption that both (or all) parties are competent, responsible, and productive partners. When such mutual regard prevails, the joint efforts of partners can result in more effective student learning and growth than any single instructional branch of the university can produce. Michael Pemberton describes it in this way:

> In sum, though WAC programs and Writing Centers may work well together when there are administrative, institutional, or pedagogical failures involved in their operations, they function together best and most productively when the instructional mission of each is enacted fully, when the epistemological differences between the two programs are seen not as points of contention but as alternative positions of strength. (p. 128).

Opportunities abound for cooperative efforts and projects. Consider the following:

- Make sure the directors of WAC programs and writing centers serve on each other's administrative boards or committees. They can be *ex officio* members that are automatically included when they accept the duties of administering one or the other program.

- Schedule regular meetings of personnel representing all three programs throughout the year to plan, assess, and revise projects. It is particularly important that the WAC and Writing Center director meet on an ongoing basis, and faculty can be invited to attend. Although informal, spontaneous conferences can be productive, visible results are more likely to come from formally considered projects that define a desirable goal and the strategies to achieve it, followed by an evaluation of how well the process worked and how the goal has improved the program. At the very least, three meetings a year can be scheduled to share planning, conduct a mid-year "reality check," and evaluate results.
- Improve public relations with faculty throughout the university. Despite the best efforts to publicize the service both WAC programs and writing centers offer to various departments, their help often goes unused simply because faculty (particularly in large universities) are not aware of its availability. Printed materials (and other publicity efforts) that link the two programs and bring their work to the attention of departments can expand the interaction among all three.

3. Include faculty in the administration of programs. The roles they play can take a variety of forms depending on the size of the institution and the extent of the program. On some campuses giving a single person oversight of both the WAC program and the Writing Center seems to work effectively; on others, individuals charged with running both complain that the job is too big for one person to handle. Such decisions regarding administrative structures will have to be made and revised by those involved.

Regardless of whether WAC and the Writing Center are headed by one person or two, it is

desirable for both programs to be supported by a network of faculty members from departments throughout the university. Their sense of what students and faculty need and want will enrich the service that WAC and the Writing Center can offer. They also serve as powerful publicizers of the work of the two programs.

4. Make department heads aware of what writing can do for their students and how it can be incorporated into their curriculum. They may need coaching on how to proceed. For example, some department heads will not have realized that if writing assignments are part of the initial courses in a major, they are more easily included in upper division courses later on because students will have become accustomed to learning and thinking in writing. Once department heads recognize that fact, they are more likely to support the introduction of a writing emphasis into beginning courses and, perhaps later, the use of portfolios and other cumulative evaluation processes.

Recommending the active participation of department heads may seem at odds with the preceding argument that both WAC programs and writing centers need the support of a network of faculty throughout the university. Although one represents assistance from the bottom up and the other from the top down, both provide significant contributions to the overall goal--i.e., the improvement of student learning and writing. Although the strongest WAC and WC programs are those in which there is widespread use of them by classroom teachers from various disciplines, the strongest departmental programs are those in which there is ongoing and consistent backing from the top. The former scenario may have an instructor or two in any given department using writing-to-learn strategies or sending students to the Writing Center to get assistance with a professional document; the latter is likely to feature a coordinated program that asks students to

participate in a sequence of increasingly complex and thoughtful writing assignments throughout all four years of the curriculum. Because vision for curricular reform materializes with the approval of the individual in charge, the involvement of the department head is important to the success of writing in that particular discipline. He or she is responsible for encouraging the development of a program that will produce graduates who use writing as problem solving and who can write in the forms of their professional discipline. It is important to remember that the involvement of faculty and department heads is not mutually exclusive. They bring different but equally important strengths to the development of WAC, writing centers, and their departments.

5. Work to make the impetus for participating in WAC and using the Writing Center come from the inside of departments, not as an imposition from the outside, and worst of all, as an imposition from the English Department. To cultivate that impetus is not always easy. One step is to establish an identity for both WAC programs and writing centers outside of the English Department. As long as faculty in other disciplines regard them as belonging solely or primarily to English, they are not likely to make extensive use of them. They will be suspicious that WAC personnel are trying to get them to do the work of composition teachers and that the Writing Center is just for English (or maybe humanities) majors. The multi-disciplinary identity can begin with a Writing Advisory Board made up of members from the different colleges (or departments) on campus. By charging such a body with policy making and activity planning, the WAC and WC programs can take on a non-departmental personality.

The same approach can be used with any instructor who has "bought in" to the workshops and other services provided by WAC and the WC. He or she can be asked to serve on committees, give workshops, or serve as a departmental liaison with WAC of the WC. An

additional strategy (that may seem contradictory to the preceding one, which asks instructors to take on more work) is to reward their efforts. When participation in WAC or WC ventures can be counted towards points on a merit evaluation, professional improvement plan, or course load negotiation, faculty members are encouraged to pursue involvement with them.

6. Finally, what the WAC program and WC's offer to the departments probably needs to be reconsidered. At most of the colleges and universities surveyed, both have been in place for five to ten years. Are they serving the current needs of students? Do their offerings to departments provide the professional revitalization that faculty members are looking for? What needs to be added? deleted? adapted? The answers will depend on the program. It is significant, however, that the answers provided to my questionnaire seem to suggest little that is different from the programs that might have been described several years ago, except that they are doing "more" of the same.

It is time to push forward in what WAC and writing centers offer to faculty and to students. Writing-to-learn strategies need to include ways to develop skills of critical thinking and problem solving. Collaborative research projects with departments can tell us what we do not yet know about our own epistemological assumptions. Examination of curriculum and visions of its reform can take us to a new level of involvement and effectiveness.

In short, Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs and writing centers, viable instructional arms that cut across all disciplines, have the power to make more positive and substantive changes in classroom instruction and student learning than they have made to date. Perhaps the results of this survey and the recommendations drawn from it will provide some direction for our next steps.

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